

LOVE ANXIETIES



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In Seminar XX, Lacan makes the puzzling statement that “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” (12/17). He also views love as the subject’s attempt to cover up the impossibility of this relationship. To understand the subject’s love relationships, it is crucial to focus on the schema found below Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, where on the male side one finds the split subject and the phallus (ibid., 73/78). There is no direct link between the phallus and the split subject: the subject has a relationship only with object *a* on the female side of the schema. On the female side, one finds three elements: a barred Woman, who has a relationship with the phallus on the side of man and with a barred Other, while she has no relationship with object *a*, which is on her side of the schema.

The major problem of male and female subjects is that they do not relate to what their partners relate to in them. The phallus that we find on the side of the man is not something a man can be happy about. Although a woman relates precisely to this phallus, the man is not at all in control of it. A man thus constantly tries to take on his symbolic function, since he knows that the symbolic function is what the woman sees in him. However, he necessarily fails in this attempt, which causes him anxiety and inhibits him. As Lacan points out: “The fact that the phallus is not found where we expect it to be, where we require it to be—namely, at the level of genital mediation—is what explains the fact that anxiety is the truth of sexuality [. . .]. The phallus, where it is expected as sexual, never appears except as lack, and this is its link with anxiety” (Seminar X, *Anxiety*, June 5, 1963, unpublished seminar). For men, the way they desire (which also is crucial for the relationship they form with object *a* on the side of their partners) is conditioned by the fact that castration has marked them by a lack, which also means that their phallic function has been negated. As a result of this negation, men are constantly anxious that they

might not be able to do it: that their organ might disappoint them when they need it most, that others might find them powerless, and so on.

Lacan points out that it is because of this anxiety that men created the myth of Eve being made out of Adam's rib. This myth allows a man to think that if just a rib was taken from him, then he is essentially not missing anything, that is, there is no lost object and woman is, therefore, just an object made from man. Although this myth tries to assure men of their wholeness, it nonetheless does not alleviate their anxiety. Anxiety often arises precisely when a man encounters a woman who becomes an object of his desire.

For Lacan, it is crucial that a man give up as lost the hope of finding in his partner his own lack ($-\phi$), that is, his fundamental castration. If this happens, everything works out well for a man: he enters into the Oedipal comedy, thinking it is Daddy who took the phallus from him—that is, that he is castrated because of the law. This comedy helps a man in his relationships; otherwise, the man takes all guilt onto himself and thinks that he is “a sinner beyond all measure” (Seminar X, March 26, 1963).

What about a woman's problem with castration? A woman also is a split subject and is thus concerned with finding the object she does not have; she also is caught up in the mechanism of desire. However, for Lacan, the fundamental dissatisfaction involved in the structure of desire in a woman is “pre-castrational”: a woman “knows that in the Oedipus complex what is involved is not to be stronger or more desirable than her mother [. . .] but to have the object” (Seminar X, March 26, 1963). Thus object *a* is, for a woman, constituted in her relationship with her mother. Lacan also claims that if a woman becomes interested in castration ($-\phi$), it is insofar as she enters into men's problems, which means that castration is secondary for a woman. As a result, “For a woman, it is initially what she doesn't have as such that becomes the object of her desire, while at the beginning, for the man it is what he is not, it is where he fails” (Seminar X, March 26, 1963). A woman is concerned that she does not possess the object that a man sees in her, and thus she constantly wonders what is in her more than herself; because of this uncertainty, she endlessly questions the Other's desire.

In short, a man is traumatized by not being able to assume his symbolic role and a woman by not possessing the object of the Other's desire. This explains why some men are so concerned with keeping intact their well-organized life, dreading encounters with women who incite their desire. Clinging to self-imposed rules gives a man at least temporary assurance that the symbolic order is whole, and that it might have endowed him with phallic power. But coming close to the object of desire opens up the possibility that this fantasy will collapse, and that the man will then be stripped naked, exposed in his essential impotence and powerlessness.

If men often respond to their love troubles by clinging tightly to obsessive rituals and self-imposed rules that are supposed to prevent them from becoming overly consumed by the object of desire, women's dilemma concerning

what kind of an object they are for men might result in the fact that they somehow give up on love and immerse themselves in melancholic indifference. How can we understand such gestures of resignation by women who, for example, realize that they were not loved in the ways they hoped to be, or who acknowledge that they have ceased to be the object *a* around which a man's love fantasy used to revolve?

When the subject somehow "gives up" and becomes indifferent to the outside world, it is not that he or she reaches "the zero level of desire, but its more or less complete reduction to the foundation of the $-\Phi$ of castration. The subject in this state definitely takes pleasure in something [. . .]. In effect, doesn't it let the subject take pleasure in the a-corporeal consistency of castration as formulated ($-\varphi = a$)?"¹ The subject thus takes pleasure precisely in the lack introduced by castration, but this symbolic lack ($-\Phi$) often gets an imaginary inscription in terms of $-\varphi$. Colette Soler points out that there are various ways in which the subject rejects the gifts of life and detaches himself or herself from the world: "From conquering desire to melancholy's abolished desire—the problematic or dubious desire of neurosis lying somewhere in-between—love of the object, self-hatred, and narcissistic investment of the self are arranged in this order. The connection between desire and jouissance is obviously crucial here: since desire is itself a defense, jouissance arises where desire diminishes. It is clear, therefore, that a depressive state is also a mode of jouissance, but this formulation is serviceable only if we manage to give it particular coordinates in each case."²

In a woman, melancholy is especially linked to feminine jouissance. When Lacan tries to decipher this jouissance, he usually invokes the example of the mystics—women (and men) who find enjoyment in a total devotion to God, who immerse themselves in an ascetic stance and detach themselves from the world. This feminine jouissance, which language cannot decipher, is thus usually perceived as the highest "happiness" that the subject can experience. However, because this jouissance is foreclosed from language, it also is something that the unconscious does not know and thus cannot assimilate. If we invoke Lacan's thesis that the remedy for sadness is for the subject to find itself in the unconscious, then the question becomes, how is this indecipherable feminine jouissance related to female melancholy?

One possible answer might be that the enjoyment a woman finds in melancholic seclusion from the world is precisely a form of feminine jouissance. In this case, an ecstatic mystic and a melancholic woman would not be very different in terms of their jouissance. However, feminine melancholy also can be a result of the fact that the woman does not find herself in feminine jouissance. Since this jouissance does not pass through the unconscious, it passes beyond the woman, which is why in women one often finds "a plus of sadness": "The delusion of melancholic indignity [. . .] is revealing here: moving to extremes it shows that the decay of the foreclosed jouissance into self-insult is the ultimate verbal rampart before that same jouissance is expelled

through an acting out that takes the form of a suicidal gesture. More commonly, I mean when we are not talking about cases of psychosis, the throwback into injury is like the first degree of paradoxical sublimation, having come to this place from *jouissance* where 'the universe is a flaw in the purity of Non-Being is vociferated.'³

This immersion into sadness or even self-injury often happens when the woman loses love. But why would this loss incite such desperate reactions in women? Following Lacan, Soler claims that it is because of the nature of feminine *jouissance* that one finds in women a specific call to an elective love, which cannot resolve the discord between phallic and feminine *jouissance*. In the love relationship she establishes, a woman will always be Other, that is, Other to herself: "Love will leave her, then, alone with her otherness, but at least the Other that love erects can label her with her lover's name, as Juliette is eternalized by Romeo, Iseult by Tristram, and Beatrice by Dante. We can deduce from this the fact that, for a woman, the loss of love exceeds the phallic dimension to which Freud reduced it. For what she loses in losing love is herself, but as an Other."⁴

If feminine *jouissance* brings women much closer to the real, specifically to the lack in the symbolic, which might result in either their mystical or depressive states, women nonetheless are also concerned with the question of what their place is in the Other's desire, and it is in order to reassure themselves about this desire that women engage in redoubling their partners. But such women often seek out men who themselves cannot commit to just one woman. Why does this happen?

A woman who constantly questions whether or not she is the object of a man's love also tries to present herself as the phallus that the man lacks. Paradoxically, a woman finds an answer to her concerns about men's desire and their phallic power in the fantasy of Don Juan which, as Lacan points out, is essentially a feminine fantasy (Seminar X, March 26, 1963; Seminar XX, 15/10). For women, this fantasy proves that there is at least one man who has it from the outset, who always has it and cannot lose it, meaning that no woman can take it from him. Since women often are concerned that a man may completely lose himself when he is with another woman, the fantasy of Don Juan reassures women that there is at least one man who never loses himself in a relationship. The fantasy of Don Juan thus assures women that the object of male desire is what belongs to them essentially, and that it is thus something that cannot be lost. Women and Don Juan thus have something in common here: no one can take the object away from women or from Don Juan, since none of them ever had it in the first place (Seminar X, March 26, 1963).

In order to deal with their love problems, men and women often redouble their partners into the figure of a stable partner and an inaccessible lover; however, this redoubling serves different purposes in the two sexes. Men often redouble their partners because the object of their desire is something they are essentially horrified by. That is why men cling so tightly to the self-imposed

prohibitions and rituals that govern their daily lives. Women redouble their partners because they can never be sure what kind of an object they are in the Other's desire. Thus for a woman it is better to fantasize that there is more than one man who is emotionally interested in her. But, paradoxically, a woman might get the most reassurance about her own value as object *a* in fantasizing about a man (e.g., Don Juan) who never actually desires her in the first place.⁵

NOTES

1. See Colette Soler, "A 'Plus' of Melancholy," in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis: Psychoanalytic Stories after Freud and Lacan*, eds. R. Golan, G. Dahan, S. Lieber, and R. Warshawsky (Jaffa: G.I.E.P., 1998), p. 101 [text modified].

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., pp. 106–7 [text modified]. Soler quotes here from Lacan's "Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 819. Trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 317.

4. Soler, "A 'Plus' of Melancholy," p. 107 [text modified].

5. This theme is further elaborated on in Renata Salecl, "Love and Sexual Difference: Doubled Partners in Men and Women," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 297–316.

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